Berliner Lautarchiv: the Wakefield sample

During the First World War, a group of linguists in Germany saw an opportunity to study the English language through the prisoners of war in their custody. This became the Königlich Preußische Phonographische Kommission. In 2008, the British Library obtained 821 digitised recordings made during the period 1915-1938, labelled as "Berliner Lautarchiv: British and Commonwealth Recordings". Their website contains 66 of these recordings, each telling the Parable of the Prodigal Son in a different dialect. One such recording is of Cyril Osborn from Wakefield, made by the sound pioneer, Wilhelm Doegen, and the professor of English, Alos Brandl, in 1916. This recording is now shown as an example of Wakefield dialect on the British Library's website, but I was struck on listening by certain features that I did not associate with Wakefield and decided to analyse this further.

Leaving aside my personal experience, there are some robust dialectological sources to compare the recording against. The two main comprehensive surveys of traditional dialects in England are, first, the fifth part of Alexander John Ellis's *On Early English Pronunciation* and, second, the *Survey of English Dialects* that was undertaken at the University of Leeds under the leadership of Harold Orton. These two sources are separated in time by several decades, but they often give similar transcriptions for the same dialect.

AJ Ellis's description of the Wakefield dialect was partly based on the 1865 book *A List of Provincial Words in use at Wakefield in Yorkshire* by William Stott Banks, which I have examined in a previous article in the YDS Transactions. It was also partly based on a visit by Thomas Hallam, whose role was akin to a fieldworker in the survey. Ellis described Wakefield as a minor variant on the Leeds dialect. Despite the proximity to Dewsbury, Ellis stated that the Wakefield dialect was clearly distinct from the Dewsbury dialect.

In the *Survey of English Dialects*, Wakefield was a test site for the third questionnaire. The nearest site to Wakefield in the survey that used the final questionnaire was Thornhill on the southern outskirts of Dewsbury (6.5 miles). The final questionnaire was also used in Leeds and Carleton, both roughly 10 miles away. Given the statement by Ellis that the Wakefield dialect differed slightly from the Dewsbury dialect (which would presumably be used in Thornhill), I resolved to use the data from Wakefield itself collected through testing the third questionnaire, which required a visit to the Leeds Archive of Vernacular Culture, where the fieldwork from the test questionnaires is stored. [1] The fieldwork was undertaken by Peter Wright in 1950. The informants were mostly from the Alverthorpe area of the city.

When listening to the recording of Cyril, the most striking point is the use of /u:/ in words such as down, around and sound. This is usually more characteristic of

[1] Ellis's statement is in accordance with the findings in the Survey of English Dialects. The transcriptions for Wakefield are closer to those for Leeds and Carleton than to those for Thornhill.

the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, and is often used as a shibboleth to divide the West Riding from the other two ridings. Both AJ Ellis and the *Survey of English Dialects* give /a:/ for these words, as is used in much of the West Riding. Cyril's use of a more northerly pronunciation cannot be ascribed to parental influence, as both his parents were from further south in the country where /u:/ would not have been the local form in these words. /u:/ forms were not recorded by either Ellis or the *Survey of English Dialects* for Wakefield, but it sporadically appeared in areas of the country away from the northern area that it is most associated with (e.g. the south-west midlands).[2] In the *Survey of English Dialects* site of Tickhill (near Doncaster), an informant could remember the old pronunciation of "about" as /əbu:t/ but said that this had been replaced by /əba:t/ or /əbaʊt/. This may be because the /u:/ form is the older form that was supplanted by /a:/ at some point in time, although the time period over which this change occurred is hard to determine. The recording of Cyril suggests that there might have still been some speakers in Wakefield who were using the older /u:/ form in the early 20th century.

Another interesting point is that Cyril's speech is rhotic: in words such as *father*, *hunger, after* and *together*, he pronounces the /r/ at the end of the word. This features of speech is common in many varieties of English across the world – including Scotland, Ireland, the USA and Canada as well as many parts of England such as the West Country. The phonetic transcriptions collected for Wakefield during the testing of the *Survey of English Dialects* are all non-rhotic. However, AJ Ellis assigned rhoticity to Wakefield with a caveat. He said that the work of WS Banks did not make clear whether the Wakefield dialect was rhotic or not, but his fieldworker Thomas Hallam had heard rhoticity in the Wakefield area. It seems plausible that rhoticity died out in the Wakefield area at some point between the words of AJ Ellis and the *Survey of English Dialects*. Although the two sources agree on most points, it seems likely that some linguistic changes occurred between the two surveys.[3] The recording of Cyril gives some support to the notion that rhoticity persisted around Wakefield in to the 20th century.[4]

There are some other pronunciations that seem unusual, such as "alive" as /əli:v/.

It occurred to me that Doegen and Brandl might have made a mistake with his record-keeping and that these features of Cyril Osborn's speech could be explained in that he was not from Wakefield at all. As I have also undertaken some genealogical research, I realised that I could check this using the censuses from 1901 and 1911. I found in these censuses a man who almost fits the description given in the record of Doegen and Brandl. He has the same name. His job is recorded as a clerk for local government. His date of birth is in 1892 rather than 1893, as recorded by Doegen and Brandl. His mother is recorded as born in Sheffield. The most concerning discrepancy is that his father is listed as having been born in Munton in Leicestershire rather than in Peterborough.

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[2] This is mentioned on page xix of *The Linguistic Atlas of England*.

[3] In the course of my research, I also found a suggestion of linguistic change in Dewsbury between the two surveys. When analysing the *Survey of English Dialects* material for Thornhill, Gunnel Melchers noted that Ellis's earlier description of the Dewsbury dialect "does not fit in very well" (1972, page 126).

[4] For what my personal experience is worth, I have never encountered any rhoticity from born-and-bred Wakefield speakers.

Although Munton is closer to Leicester than to Peterborough, it seems plausible that Cyril might have only known that his father was from somewhere near Peterborough, or even that Doegen and Brandl were more familiar with Peterborough than with Leicester and chose to take that as the nearest large town to Munton. On this basis, it seems safe to assume that the recording really is of a man from Wakefield.

By selecting Cyril Osborn, the Wakefield dialect was illustrated by a particularly conservative speaker. The pronunciations that are traditional described as making up the traditional West Riding dialect have not existed forever. It is likely that Cyril Osborn demonstrated an earlier stage in the dialect – a time when residents of the West Riding said /u:/ for words such as *down* and *about*, and pronounced the r at the end of words such as *father* in a rhotic manner. There might even have been someone yet more conservative in their speech in Wakefield in 1916. It is impossible to be sure that one has found the most conservative speaker of a dialect.

This also illustrates the difficulty in taking any given pronunciation as the definitive one for a certain area. Language is in a constant state of flux. When we in the Yorkshire Dialect Society mark *doon* as the form for the North and East Ridings, we should remember that it was used in the West Riding once as well. As language continues to change throughout Yorkshire, this case illustrates the great difficulty faced by dialectologists who strive to ensure that their sample of informants captures the range of language used in a community.

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